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Distributed Leadership: Still in the Gift of the Headteacher

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary efforts to reconceptualise the teaching profession in Scotland as seen with the Donaldson (2011) *Review of Teacher Education*, the McCormac (2011) *Review of Teacher Employment* and the GTCS (2012) *Review of Professional Standards* are aligning themselves to certain principles. Among them, is the core principle that leadership should form an integral feature of the role of every qualified teacher. Teacher leadership is premised on a distributed perspective on leadership. However, defining leadership, distributed leadership and teacher leadership proves problematic. So too does the identification of the expectations and responsibilities related to discrete and complementary roles within school hierarchies within the suite of revised professional standards.

This article takes as its focus the problematic nature of distributed leadership. It reports on a study exploring a distributed perspective on school leadership through three headteacher case studies conducted in Scottish primary schools. It draws from a sequence of in-depth, semi-structured and narrative style interviews conducted with each headteacher, as well as from a semi-structured questionnaire and sociometric analysis conducted with staff. The article reports on six themes emerging from an analysis of the findings. The sixth dominant theme is discussed in detail. To a large extent, distributed leadership was found to be in the gift of the headteacher, actively encouraging, enabling and facilitating distributed leadership at individual and whole staff levels. Implications are drawn for educational leadership in relation to contemporary Scottish policy developments.

INTRODUCTION

Nationally, the political will for distributed leadership in schools is clear (Torrance, 2012). A number of key factors have contributed to setting a policy direction resulting in a distributed perspective on leadership becoming an established expectation for the leadership and management of Scottish schools. Globally, the emergence of distributed leadership resulted from the shift to devolve school governance (Rhodes, 1997), coupled with new public management and associated workforce reform (Giddens, 1998). Distributed leadership resonates with organisational learning within the knowledge economy (Hartley, 2010). In the UK, increased compliance together with changes to the governance of schools and a more complex headteacher role followed. In Scotland, despite a distinct educational ideology, legislation and policy milieu, the global school improvement movement, with associated devolved responsibility to schools within a compliance culture, similarly resulted in key changes to the headteacher role. Distributed leadership was heralded an elixir for the challenges besetting Scottish education such as devolved governance, the perceived leadership crisis, the inherent difficulties in school management structures, workload pressures and issues of succession planning. The search for solutions-focused research, along with the endorsement of applied research and the considerable influence of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE), heavily influenced policy development in this area. Distributed leadership became normatively and aspirationally positioned. Consequently, politically approved headship preparation, promoting a distributed perspective rooted in the national Standard for Headship, utilised government endorsed discourse.